10: d'Orleans--263 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 502

"Before the start, our men fasten fresh bamboos to the sides of the pirogues, and place a thick row of palm trees round the bows, forming a small hedge. The effect is original, for we seem to carry a garden in front of us. In spite of these precautions, we ship several waves at the first rapid; it is considered dangerous, and we are not sorry to find ourselves on the other side, for the impression is very different when descending the river instead of ascending it; everything depends upon the steersman placed at the bows. The man must be very skilful, for he has to guide the pirogue, which moves with great rapidity, exactly between two rocks, one surplus touch of the oar would inevitably sink it."

10: d'Orleans--271 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 502, 789

"The river narrows and forms a rapid, which is considered dangerous; and before he approaches it our steersman takes off his turban and rolls it round his breast, then he washes his face, kneels down like a Mussulman with clasped hands, then, raising himself, he strikes the pirogue several times with his hand; he is invoking the devil, who guards the rapids, and is begging him to grant us a safe passage. This prayer is a Laotian custom; for my own part the ceremonial inspires me with less confidence than our men's quick eyes and strong arms, which take us through the rapids without any check."

133 vast impenetrable forests and "the traveler sees only tall grass or
137 gigantic trees intertwined with lianas, then all at once, through a break in the foliage, he discovers the cascades of a river. This is the only noise to interrupt the impressive silence of these great forests" (2).

2. L. de Reinach, Le Laos, 1911.

133 Set against the huge mountain masses of Yunnan, this tormented region has always been the natural refuge of peoples driven out of India or China by famine, great invasions or religious discord, and its orography explains, in large measure, the multiplicity of tiny
/631/ states which were formed there throughout the ages. Its abrupt defiles radiate out and, so to speak, become calmed in the valleys of the Ménam, the Mékong and the Red River, and its principal substructure spreads out /5/ and ends in a vast plateau known as the plateau of Tran-Ninh, whose hillocks are planted with pine trees and drop suddenly from east to west.

In the southeast, however, the Tran-Ninh plateau clings "like an excrescence" to a long artery known as the Annamitic Chain which forms a distinct line of demarcation between Laos and Annam. This chain runs parallel to the coast in a northwest-southeast direction, and its peaks go all the way down to the Mékong by successive stages, first forming plateaus or folds of ground covered with thick forests (dông in Laotian), then slighter undulations where there are forest glades (khok in Laotian), and finally vast ricefields ending in the river.

The Mékong. This great river frontier which, over 800 kilometers of its length, marks the political separation of French Indo-China from the kingdom of Siam, gives life to Laos, together with its tributaries, "as the Nile constitutes Egypt." It fertilizes it with
/226/ its alluvia, feeds the native with its fish and guarantees transport for
/505/ his rafts and pirogues from north to south. But this liquid highway where nature seems to have taken pleasure in piling up obstacles and which is cut by numerous rapids and barred by waterfalls, can not be
●/502/ /6/ regarded as usable for regular navigation over all of its length.
133 Fed by the melting snows of Tibet, the Mékong enters Laos through a capricious gorge, widens for a moment in the alluvia of an old lake basin and narrows again towards Luang-Prabang. Grandiose surroundings framed by the blue line of the far-off peaks give it what

part of the natives' diet? Do not its alluvia yield the cotton, tobacco and indigo which are indispensable to the Laotian, and does not the river itself, in the high water period, transport the wood needed for cooking food, so that, in a manner of speaking, it has only to recede in order to collect firewood? Finally, from the commercial point of view, is not the Mékong the great fluvial artery and the only practical route joining Yunnan to Saigon? M. Blancsubé, a former deputy for Cochinchina, envisaged the use to which the Mékong could be put when he said:

"I see in our establishment throughout the whole Mékong valley, the means of making flow into Saigon the products of thirty kingdoms and tribes scattered along the river, as well as those of Yunnan and those of the interior provinces of China. I see the means of making Saigon into one of the greatest storehouses in the world, and making it the queen of the Far East."

The vision is a tempting one. Unfortunately, the reality is quite another thing. On the one hand the orientation of trade towards Bangkok was climaxed by the completion of the Korat railroad, while on our part the problem of making the Mékong navigable from Yunnan to the sea is still far from having been solved.

Looked at as a whole, the Mékong flows first in a largely north and south direction as far as Ban-Houé-Pak-Kop (1) (where the Houé-

(1) Pak = mouth, junction of rivers.

Kop flows into its right bank), then turns suddenly eastward in the gorge which it has cut around the plateau which forms the last stage of the Sib-Song-Pahn-Na.

Macey (2) says, in this connection, that one can almost certainly

(2) "Cinq ans au Laos." Lecture delivered before the Society of Commercial Geography [Société de Géographie commerciale] on November 19, 1895.

accept the hypothesis that in a relatively recent geological epoch the Mékong flowed into the sea in the Gulf of Siam through the valley of the present-day Ménam. The other branch of the Mékong which goes down to the sea through Cambodia and Cochinchina was a continuation of the Nam-Hou. It was only when an upheaval or